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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the symbiotic relationship between art and social studies and suggests ways to integrate the two in the curriculum. The document advocates the study of art in context as a way to help students better understand the historical past by the values reflected in artwork, as well as recognize the power and potertial of art for shaping contemporary attitudes and values. Discipline-based art education is compared with social studies concerns and parallels are drawn with art history, art criticism, art production, and aesthetics. Suggestions are given for integrating art and social studies, striving for balance that does not reduce one to the subservience of the other. Thematic, integrated, and multi-disciplinary instructional designs can cluster learning, make connections among activities, discover relationships among things, and encourage mastery of subject matter. (EH)

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Art Education in the Social Studies

by Marjorie Cohee Manifold

The symbiotic relationship between art and social studies suggests them for compatible pairing in an integrated curriculum. Knowledge of both art and the social studies may be developed sequentially and cumulatively. Social studies should be introduced at the primary level of schools to examine the immediate environment and local community. It progresses to a study of global issues and events. Knowledge of art begins with recognition of basic elements: line, color, value, texture, form, and space. It progresses to an exploration of their arrangement into meaningful relationships of balance, emphasis, rhythm, and unity. The formal language of art, like the dates of human events, depends upon knowledge of context to accommodate meaning. Social studies presents knowledge of human experiences, while art has the power to provide an intimate understanding of human experiences through personal encounters that yield insights. Art, as a way of knowing, presents a kind of knowledge that the facts and abstractions of the social studies cannot make known.

Social Studies as a Context of Art. When students have the opportunity to study artworks from the past, they begin to understand how art reflects the values of society and how the arts have been influenced by social, political, and economic beliefs of a society. An art object reflects the historic time and cultural context of its origin. Indeed, much of what is known or surmised of ancient cultures comes from art and architectural evidence. Artworks may record how people, places, and things looked. Materials and production techniques of past eras may give indications of geographic environment and societal structure. Aesthetic choices made in form and decoration may reveal philosophic or religious beliefs.

Students can also recognize the power and potential of art for shaping contemporary attitudes and values. Advertisers, entertainers, politicians, and private interest groups bombard public audiences daily with visual messages that persuade, cajole, direct, entice, and seduce viewers to think and act in predetermined ways. Tyrants, who seek to control the hearts and minds of people, understand that artists may use symbols powerfully to convey feelings and ideas that speak to the deepest human emotions. Images can be used to lull viewers into complacency, urge patriotic fervor, enrage against injustice, or inspire spiritual devotion. The arts are a living expression, an empowered and empowering voice of contemporary society, urging and molding society as well as reflecting it.

A society that would be democratic and free requires a public capable of deciphering and criticizing nonverbal messages. Understanding the visual message empowers viewers to accept or reject the message, or transform the message. Controversies concerning censorship, which voices will be allowed to be heard, the appropriateness of funding for divergent voices—even questions of what does or does not constitute art—are ongoing issues that require response from a visually literate, critically thoughtful society.

Subjects of the Social Studies and the Discipline-Based Art Education Framework. A student's understanding of the meaning of an artwork increases when the student experiences working with the materials and processes that artists use to create art. Understanding also broadens with knowledge of when and where the work was made, the creator, the function it served in society, and what experts said about it. This approach to art education is called discipline-based art education (DBAE). The DBAE construct (Clark 1991) gives four components to the study of visual arts. These components—art history, art criticism, art production, and aesthetics—are comparable to areas of social studies concern. All dimensions of the history of humankind, like the history of art, include a description of when, where, and by whom. Historical criticism, like art criticism, requires analysis of the unique features or aspects of the event, interpretation of how the event influenced the world around it, and judgment about the importance of the event in the historic stream.

Art production involves experimentation with various media, acquisition of technical skills, development of problem-solving abilities, and judgments of quality. Extended into the social studies realm, questions regarding media, skill acquisition, production, and product are determined by historic influences, geography, environmental resources, and socio-political structure. Who creates art? Who consumes art? What form does art take? How is knowledge of art-making transferred from one generation to another? These questions raise issues inseparable from social studies considerations. Economic issues pertain to what is valued in society, as indicated by the economics of art—from the production of artworks to be shared freely by family and community to the multimillion dollar purchase of single paintings by collectors, who will hide them in back vaults from public view.

Climate and geographic resources have much to do with the choice of media, production techniques, and even choice of colors and patterns to be used as decorative devices. From the corvee creation of the Great Wall of China to women-made Amish quilts, or from the noble social experiment of Depression-era WPA murals to the controversial birthing of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC—art products and production are determined as much by the larger influences of cultural belief, economic and political structure, and societal need as by the hands of the artist or artists who created them. Aesthetics too, which pertains to art theory and questions the meaning of art, may be seen as a significant component of a broader philosophic question asking

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about humankind's relationship to the universe. Thus, aesthetics—a facet of art education—is relevant to social studies education.

Integrating Art and the Social Studies. While there is no prescribed method of integrating art and the social studies, the integration should strive for balance, which does not reduce one to the subservient partner of the other. One approach to effective integration is through the use of thematic units. Thematic units allow for the exploration of a topic from the viewpoint of several disciplines, with each discipline in turn taking center stage in the investigation. The amount of time given to each discipline is variable, determined by lesson objectives, learner interest, teacher assessment of learner need, and the potential of the theme's subject. Thematic, integrated, and multi-disciplinary instructional designs share overlapping goals of providing a point of reference around which learning can cluster, making connections among activities, discovering relationships between things, and encouraging mastery of subject matter. Additionally, the approach can be designed to allow students to become participants in inquiry rather than passive receivers of information.

The history component of social studies can be seen as a powerful area of art integration. History is an integrative subject with a profound capacity for incorporating the study of other subjects, such as art. It has been indicated that art is a product of its unique historic and cultural origin. It is also a window back into conceptual understanding of that context. History comes alive, and far-away cultures come close to home, as students are able to conceptualize historic dates and factual events through period-correlated artifacts and visual images. The visual arts are specifically useful in the teaching of history courses or historic themes. Visual images, which encourage visual thinking, allow students to imagine the progression of historic events as having interconnected structural patterns of form and meaning. When historic periods are used as central themes, art may be put to work as the visual language which connects meaning and events in an overarching structure. Acquiring the ability to see such structures is a fundamental cognitive achievement (Arnheim 1989).

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